

NEGRO FOLK LORE STORIES

by
Sallie Southall Cotten



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Told Little Elsie

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By

SALLIE SOUTHALL COTTEN



*WHAT AUNT DORCAS
TOLD LITTLE ELSIE*

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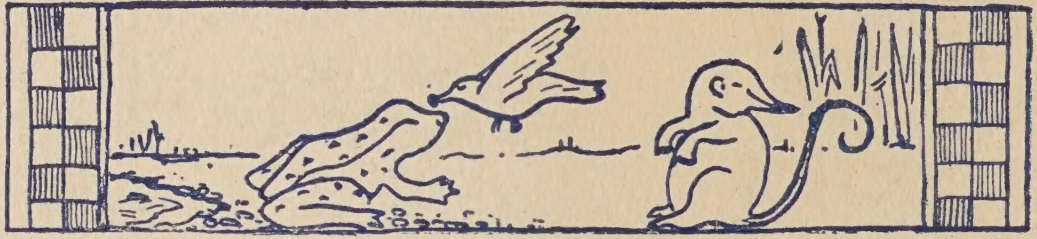
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ELSIE GILMORE was born in New England and knew all about Plymouth Rock and the Pilgrim Fathers. She could tell about the battle of Bunker Hill and describe Paul Revere's Ride, but she knew absolutely nothing about Southern negroes. So when her mother went to visit a school friend in Alabama and took Elsie with her, the little girl was fascinated by the shining black faces and strange dialect of the negro women who were the domestic adjuncts of Mrs. Hardee's home. She was a little chary of the negro chauffeur, but her greatest joy was an old negro woman, dai-



ly attired in an immaculate white apron and cap, who seemed to have no special duties, but who was ready when called upon for such services as she was still capable of rendering. Every one called her "Aunt Dorcas" and the familiar title puzzled Elsie. One day she asked Mrs. Hardee the direct question as to whether Aunt Dorcas was truly her "aunt."

"Oh! no," replied her hostess, "that is only an old Southern custom. When Aunt Dorcas was a child, she and all her people were owned by my grandfather. Her mother was my Black Mammy, and for many years Aunt Dorcas was my cook.



When her mother became too infirm to work we supported her until she died, and now we are doing the same for Aunt Dorcas. The families have never drifted apart as so many did when the slaves were made free. We cannot turn her adrift because we love her, and she has no children to care for her. but calling her "Aunt" is only an old custom to which some Southerners cling." This explanation satisfied Elsie and being of a social temperament, she and Aunt Dorcas became very friendly.

Some days later the two school friends were to attend a dinner party in honor of Elsie's mother. Aunt Dorcas was requested



to sit in the room with Elsie until they returned. This arrangement delighted Elsie and after she was ready for bed she begged Aunt Dorcas for a story and suggested that she tell her again about the Tar Baby.

“Doan yon nebber git tired uv dat sticky Tar Baby?” inquired Aunt Dorcas. “Hit peers to me dat nice little gyurls lak you is orter hear erbout flowers, an’ burds, an’ bees, an’ sich like. I’s gwinter tell you er new wun dis time erbout de bees an’ de honeysuckles.* My mammy uster tell it to us chillun when we wuz little.” Elsie, alert

*A wild azalea, indigenous to the South, and known as honeysuckles because of their nectar-filled blossoms. Though full of honey the bees never gather it.



with interest, snuggled down in the bed while Aunt Dorcas proceeded.

“In de beginnin’ you know how Gawd made everythin’ fur Adum an’ den made Sunday fur heseff. He tole Adum not to mek de animals work on dat day, an’ sed fur everything to rest on dat day coz it wuz Gawd’s Day. Everything had its own ’pint-ed duty for to do, an’ de bees wuz jes made fur to git honey frum de flowers. Dat wuz dey speshul work. When de spring time cum and de woods wuz full er honeysuckles den de trubble begun. De pink an’ white honeysuckle flowers wuz jess plum full er honey and de bees worked nite an’ day erget-



tin' it out. Den de Sabbath Day dawned an' de bees 'membered it wuz Gawd's Day and dey wuz tole fur to rest dat day. De bees, dey didden know how to rest, coz dey wuz made fur to work stiddy. All dey knowed wuz how to make honey.

"Dey buzzed erroun' an' erroun' an' den flocked inter de woods fur ter discuss de sit-terwashun. De Queen Bee leff her throne an' set in er tree fur ter lissen ter de arger-fying.' Everywheres dem bees swarm-ed till de trees wuz full uv 'em. Dey buzzed and dey buzzed, an' dey buzzed. Bime-by wun bee sed, 'whut is we gwinter do, rest or work?' "



Ernudder bee buzzed out, "Bees kant rest. Bees gotter work, bees doan know how to rest."

" 'But we wuz tole ter rest one day,' buzzed er ole fat bee who wuz er gittin' lazy anyway.

" 'Yes,' buzzed ernudder bee, 'but we wuz tole ter wuk six days an' rest one day, so wuk must shore be wuff six time more dan rest.'

" 'Dat's so,' buzzed ernudder bee, "but how cum dat honey in de honeysuckles doan nebber stop to rest? Dat honey jess flows all de time an' doan nebber stop on Gawd's Day.'



“Dis caused er grate commoshun, an’ de bees buzzed louder dan ever. Den wun sol-lum old Bumble Bee sed, ‘dat settles hit. De honey flowers doan nebber stop ter rest an’ wuk am wuth six times more dan rest is, so we’ll git dat honey, an’ when dem honey-suckles rest den we kin rest too.’

“Den dey stopped erbuzzin’ and all flew erway an’ de Queen Bee waved her wings at ’em coz she was proud uv her working people, an’ she went back to her throne reddy fur ter eat honey. All dat booful Sabbath Day de bees spent ergatherin’ de honey from the honeysuckle flowers.

“But Gawd doan nebber furgit dem dat



disobeys Him an' he sont er strong wind ter blow dem bees inter his Manshun in de sky. He told dem what dey had dun an' dey didden eben buzz, coz dey knowed hit wuz de trufe. Gawd knowed He had made dem bees ter love dey work an' he knowed how big de temptashun wuz fur dem to work all de time, so he let dem chuse 'tween two punishments. Dey could work all seben uv de days Gawd had made an' neber rest none, an' neber touch de honeysuckle flowers; or dey cud rest one day an' hab all de other flowers in de worl' ter git honey from de other six days. De flowers wuz erbloomin' all eround' an' dey cud smell de honeysuckles an' dey



knowed dem cups wuz full uv sweetness, but den dey knowed de worl' wuz full uv sweet flowers. an' dey could find honey everywhere. So dey chused to work all de time an' neber tech de honeysuckles agin, an' dat is how cum bees neber tech dem honey-full blossoms."

"How does you lak dat one honey?" asked Aunt Dorcas.

"I like sticky honey flowers better than sticky Tar Babies, but please tell me another one," pleaded Elsie. Aunt Dorcas smoothed her apron and proceeded.

"Dis time I gwinter tell you how cum frogs iz pop-eyed. Lots er things dat Gawd made



got dissaterfied coz dey didden hab sense er-nuff ter understan' how dey wuz made, an' dey didden know dey had ter git 'sperience erbout dis here worl'. De frog he complained coz he wuz tired uv settin' on his tail, fur in dem days frogs had tails an' didden hab no eyes. One day dat discontented frog fell inter a hole so deep he cudden git out. He jumped an' he jumped, but ever time he jumped he fell back on he tail. While he was ersittin' dare er ole mole cum erlong scratchin' his way thru de groun,' and cum ter dat same hole whar de frog was ersittin.' De mole's eyes wuz full er dirt an' he begun ter cumplane uv he's hard luck.



“ ‘Who is you,’ axed de frog, fur de animals was not ’quainted wid each udder den.

“ ‘I is de mole,’ sed he. ‘I was er diggin’ mah way erlong an’ fell inter dis hole. Mah eyes is full er dirt an’ I ain’t got enny tail ter bresh hit out wid, an’ mah feets is too short ter be er frog, an’ maybe it am a serus thing. ennyway. So I has ter suffer twell de dirt melts outter mah eyes. Who is you?’

“ ‘I is de frog,’ he sed, an’ looked so solum dat de mole ’sposed it was mitey serus ter reach mah eyes, and dey turn backwards

“Den de frog sed, ‘I got er tail but ’taint no yuse to me coz I sets on it all de time. You libe in de dark an’ doan need enny eyes an’



jest gits 'em full er dirt. 'Spose we trade. I will gib yuh mah tail fur yore eyes.'

"De mole ergreed, an' he cut off de frog's tail wid he sharp teeth an' claws an' den de frog tied hit keerfully at de end er de mole's body whar tails orter be. Den dey got 'fraid fur how wuz dey gwinter git de mole's eyes outer he haid. De frog cudden see how ter do it coz he didden hab no eyes, and de mole cudden rech um wid he's short flat feet. Rite den er burd come flyin' erlong an' dey axed him ter do de work. De burd wuz erlookin' fur er wurm fur his mate an' de little burds dat hollered all de time, but he stoped ter hep um. Wid his sharp bill de burd



pecked erround de mole's eyes an' tuk um boff out an' de mole went erscratchin' erlong an' mitey proud uv de new tail. Den de burd pecked two holes in de haid uv de frog an' stuck in de mole's eyes in de holes, but he wuz in er hurry an' he didden take time ter peck de holes deep ernuff an de eyes wudden go in good but stuck out frum de frog's haid. De frog cudden see heseff an' didden know the work was er bad job, so he axed de burd to lift him outer de hole an' den de burd flew away an' leff dem eyes erstickin' haff way out an' dey growed dat air way. Dat is why frogs is allways pop-eyed



an' dat is why young frogs* hab tails an' no eyes, an' lose dey tails when dey gits eyes."

"How does you like dat one honey?" asked Aunt Dorcas.

"I like it," said Else, "but tell me another."

"Aint yuh ergitten sleepy yit?" she asked.

Elsie declared she was wide awake though her eyelids were drooping even as she begged for another story. Aunt Dorcas cheerfully continued.

"Dis time I gwinter tell yer how de Blue Jay sold heseff to de debil. All de burds is

*Tadpoles.



got marks on dey bressbones an' dat mark is de sign of de work. De Dove iz got er 'M' on his bressbone for to mean 'Mourner' coz he mourns all de time an' kaint stop coz dat is his bizness, jess to mourn ober de trubble in dis here world. De Blue Jay is de debil's burd an' got er curus mark on his bressbone. Nobody ain't nebber knowed what dat curus mark do mean coz de Blue Jay ain't neber told it, but de debil put it dare. Dat Blue Jay am er mitey curus burd. He awl time er fightin' de udder burds an' eatin' up dey eggs an' dey baby burds, an' de udder burds doan lub him erbit. But Blue Jay doan keer fur dat. He am er mitey biggerty burd,

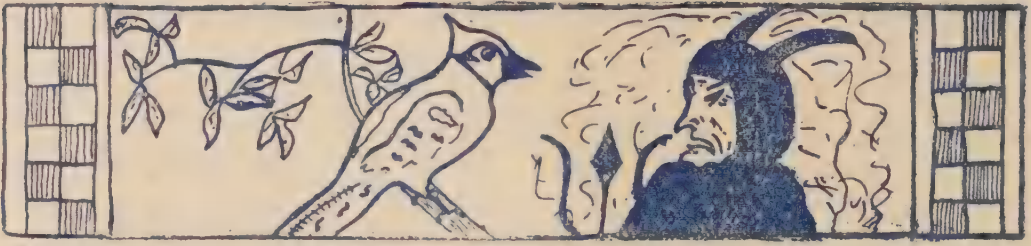


he am jess like er good lookin' 'oman, coz he knows he am good looking too. Hit happen' dis er way erbout dat curus mark. One day de Blue Jay had whipped er burd outer her nest an' et up all her eggs when de debil cum erlong an' sed:

“ ‘Good work, Blue Jay. Fite um an' git what you want. Say Blue Jay, kin you keep er secret?’ ”

“ ‘Try me, sed de Blue Jay.

“Den de debil sed, ‘I got lots er fokes doin' debilment work but dey doan do it rite all de time, an' it pesters me to be ercumin' frum Hell all de time to keep dem doin' de



work. I needs er flyin' spy to cum an' tell me when things is ergoin' rong. Kaint you be de Spy Burd an' bring me de news when de debilment work is ergitten slack?"

"If I does dat fur you, whut is you gwin ter do for me?' axed de Blue Jay.

" 'I will put er mark on yer bressbone dat will bring you all my strength when you fites an' will keep dat top notch on yer haid stiff an' shiney, an' you will be de boss uv de little burds if you doan neber tell who put dat mark on you. If you do tell whut dat mark means den all your strength will be gone an' de udder burds kin whip you.'



“ ‘Now de Blue Jay wanted to be de boss burd and promused de debil ter go to Hell ever Friday an’ tell de debil how de debilment work is ergoin on, an’ help plan more debilments. He kep dat promus, an’ every Friday—dat unlucky day—de Blue Jay goes ter Hell, carries er twig uv er tree fur de debil’s fire an’ tells him de news of all de debilment work ergoin’ on in de world. Everything has ter work an’ de debil has to git folks to help do his work, an’ he put dat curus mark on de Blue Jay’s bressbone coz de Blue Jay belongs ter him fur ever, jess as de Dove belongs ter Gawd. Nobody aint neber knowed what dat curus mark on de



Blue Jay means, coz de Blue Jay haint neber told it, but it am de debil's mark an' de Blue Jay am de debil's Spy Burd and nobody doan lub him coz he helps de debil in all his debilments.

“How does you like dat one, honey?” asked Aunt Dorcas again, but Elsie was fast asleep, indifferent to Satan and all his spies, and Aunt Dorcas dozed in her chair until Elsie's mother returned from the dinner party and relieved her vigil.



